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ABSTRACT

Typical ethical dilemmas confronted by educational administrators and their normative levels of ethical reasoning are identified in this two-phase study. The first phase, which involves in-depth interviews with 23 principals, applies the Van Hoose and Paradise (1979) developmental model of ethical reasoning to self-reports of decision making processes in ethically problematic situations. The second phase, based on interviews with 20 practicing administrators, compares the principals' reported levels of ethical reasoning with their perceptions of their peers' levels of ethical reasoning. Findings indicate that each group functions at the societal level of ethical reasoning, and that administrators perceive themselves as operating at a higher ethical level than their peers. A second finding suggests that ethical behavior is influenced by the ethical behavior of superordinates. A third conclusion is that reported behavior is not indicative of high levels of ethical reasoning. Finally, the level of moral growth may be inversely related to the length of time spent in the institution. Although the results have limited generalizability, a recommendation is made for participation in district-sponsored in-service workshops which address ethical issues in educational administration. (9 references) (LMI)

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The Ethical Reasoning of School Administrators: The Principled Principal

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The Ethical Reasoning of School Administrators:

The Principled Principal

In Leaders for America's Schools, the National Commission for Excellence in Educational Administration (1987) noted that programs designed to train administrators were "unconnected to the issues which administrators were engaged in resolving" (p. 50). The Commission joined others in recommending that commitment to ethical standards be a key component in the development of educational administrators (Leslie, Snyder, & Giddis, 1988; Peterson & Finn, 1985). Presently, however, courses in ethics are rare in educational administration programs and instructional resources are virtually nonexistent. The case study approach to teaching ethics has been common in other disciplines (Howe, 1985; Strike & Soltis, 1985; Van Hoose & Paradise, 1979), but casebooks for educational administration are not readily available.[1] Developing a knowledge base for such an approach would seem prudent.

In response to this lack of resources and to a growing concern over unethical practices in the professions, this research is an initial attempt to describe typical ethical dilemmas confronted by educational administrators and to determine normative levels of ethical reasoning of practicing school administrators. The study was conducted in two phases.

Phase 1 Procedure and Results

In the first phase, 23 school principals in a large suburban public school district described a typical ethical dilemma that they had experienced. Follow-up questions requested details of all alternatives that were considered in response to the dilemma, the course of action taken, any input solicited from others, intended and unintended consequences, level of support received from immediate supervisors, and a retrospective evaluation of the choices made.

The dilemmas were summarized and grouped according to the individuals affected. Four groups emerged. More than one half of all dilemmas involved questions of teacher competence. The remaining incidents involved student behavior, teacher/student conflicts, or teacher/parent conflicts.

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[1] The recent Ethics of School Administration (Strike, Haller, & Soltis, 1988) is a notable exception.

The Van Hoose and Paradise (1979) model was used to determine the level of ethical reasoning apparent from principals' descriptions of their decision processes. Van Hoose and Paradise proposed a developmental model of ethical reasoning based on Kohlberg's (1976) stages of moral development. In their view, an individual's ethical orientation progresses along a continuum of increasingly more complex stages. Individuals operating from a punishment orientation (Stage 1) base decisions on prevailing rules and standards. Stage 2 is characterized by an institutional orientation; rules and policies of the institution of affiliation dictate judgments. At Stage 3, ethical reasoning is guided by societal orientation, a concern for the general welfare of society. An individual orientation prevails at Stage 4; concern for the client takes precedence over legal, professional or societal norms. Finally, at Stage 5 (principle orientation), decisions are formulated in accordance with an internalized code of ethics.

Two doctoral students in counselor education who had been trained in the use of Van Hoose and Paradise's Ethical Judgment Scale (1979) rated the principals' levels of ethical reasoning in each of the dilemmas presented. Interrater reliability, based on percent agreement, was very high. The modal response rate was near the mid-point of the ethical reasoning scale, indicating that principals explained their decisions on the basis of societal expectations. Prevailing rules of the organization explained reasoning in another 31% of the cases. Only six percent of the principals' reported actions were judged to be at the Punishment level.

Nineteen percent of the principals were judged to reason at or above the Individual level. These principals reported difficulty reaching a decision to suspend a student or dismiss a teacher because of the consequences to the individual. They reasoned, however, that the negative consequences to the larger student body resulting from inaction (or alternative actions) far outweighed the concern for the individual.

The results obtained during Phase I (presented in more detail in Kirby, Paradise, & Protti, 1989) raised additional questions regarding the ethical decisions of school administrators. According to Van Hoose and Paradise's (1979) model of ethical decision-making, an individual may reason at levels higher than actually reflected by their behavior. Thus, while principals are rated as operating at high developmental stages of ethical reasoning based on their reported behaviors,

actual level of functioning may be at a lower stage. Additional support is warranted if a normative depiction of administrators' ethical decisions is desired. Developing an understanding of the ethical reasoning of school administrators would seem to require analysis of both individuals' perceptions of their own practices as well as their perceptions of the behavior of other school administrators. In order to determine whether differences exist between levels of ethical reasoning of practicing administrators and perceived levels of reasoning of peers, a second phase in the investigation was begun.

Phase 2 Procedure and Results

Three dilemmas that were reported and summarized in Phase I were modified to include descriptions of four to five alternative courses of action. Whenever possible, these alternatives were taken directly from the principals' descriptions of actions that they had considered. Additional plausible alternatives for each dilemma were devised to achieve a total of four to five alternatives per situation. In all cases, the course of action actually chosen by the principal who presented the dilemma constituted one alternative. Alternatives were constructed to represent varying levels of ethical reasoning. Thus, for each dilemma, possible courses of action included both extremes in ethical reasoning.

Summaries of the nature of the three dilemmas and the response alternatives for each were presented to 20 additional school administrators. Participants were asked to choose the course of action they would take in response to each dilemma and to give a brief explanation for their decisions. Alternatives not included in the list were accepted. In addition, these same principals were asked to indicate how they felt that the "typical" principal in their school district would respond and to indicate the perceived reasons for their behavior. Seventeen administrators provided usable responses in this phase of the study.

Three dilemmas were selected for inclusion in Phase 2. The first involved an experienced teacher suffering from burnout. With only three years until retirement, her performance had declined dramatically and remediation efforts had been unsuccessful. Possible courses of action included immediate dismissal proceedings, continued assistance, and transfer.

The second dilemma concerned a teacher-student conflict. The principal received conflicting accounts of an incident in which the student had become verbally

abusive because the teacher had refused to allow him to sharpen his pencil. The principal also received reports that the teacher had repeatedly provoked the student and had vowed to have him suspended for the remainder of the school year. Alternative solutions to this dilemma included suspending the student as recommended by the teacher, ignoring the teacher's request, reprimanding the teacher, transferring the student, and counseling the teacher.

Finally, a third case involved an honor student caught with alcohol in her possession at a school athletic function. There was no evidence that the student had been drinking, but school policy called for suspension for possession of alcoholic beverages at school events. Among the decisions the principal could make were suspending the student according to policy, banning the student from future school events but not suspending her, verbally warning the student since this was a first offense, and requiring counseling for the student.

In determining the level of ethical reasoning, one must consider the particular alternative selected, but the primary concern is with the reasons the administrator gives for choosing that alternative. Thus, two administrators might select the same course of action, but one might be rated at a higher level because of the reasons stated for the selection.

On average, the 17 administrators were rated near the Societal level for the three dilemmas. That is, the mean score (where 1=Punishment orientation and 5=Principle orientation) across all cases was 2.71 with a range of 1.67 to 3.67 and standard deviation of .55. The means for individual dilemmas ranged from 1.94 for the honor student case to 3.24 for the teacher-student conflict. Thus, principals in this sample did not differ markedly from their peers in the Phase 1 sample whose average response was also near the Societal level of ethical reasoning.

A second question of interest was how principals thought other administrators would act in similar situations. While it is important to know how and why individuals report that they <u>actually</u> <u>responded</u> (Phase 1) or <u>would</u> <u>respond</u> (Phase 2) in cases of professional dilemma, their perceptions of how others would respond may give a more complete account of how typical administrators do respond. Further, these perceptions give a clearer picture of the state of ethics in the profession; that is, they disclose the degree of comfort with and trust in the moral character of individuals in educational administration.

Presented in Table 1 is a comparison of the ethical reasoning scores assigned to administrators' choices and to the choices they designated for their "typical" colleague. It appears that administrators report functioning at higher ethical levels than they perceive among their colleagues. The average rating for perceived actions of others was 2.13, indicating that administrators believe that their colleagues function nearer to the Institutional level of ethical reasoning. In fact, 50 percent of all actions ascribed to others were judged to be at or below the Institutional level. In contrast, less than 18 percent of the administrators' self-reported actions were rated at or below this level.

Table 1

Mean ethical reasoning ratings of self-reported administrator behavior and administrator-perceived colleague behavior

	Administrators			Colleagues		
M	f	%	cumulative %	f	%	cumulative %
1.26 - 1.50	0	0.0	0.0	3	18.8	18.8
1.51 - 1.75	2	11.8	11.8	3	18.8	37.5
1.76 - 2.00	1	5.9	17.6	2	12.5	50.0
2.01 - 2.25	0	0.0	17.6	0	0.0	50.0
2.26 - 2.50	1	5.9	23.5	2	12.5	62.5
2.51 - 2.75	6	35.3	58.8	5	31.3	93.8
2.76 - 3.00	4	23.5	82.4	1	6.2	100.0
3.01 - 3.25	0	0.0	82.4			
3.26 - 3.50	2	11.8	94.1			
3.51 - 3.75	1	5.9	100.0			

Administrators were asked to explain why they chose their particular course of action for each dilemma, and why they believed others would choose the same or a different course of action. According to these respondents, their behavior would differ from the behavior of other administrators in one of every three cases. In no case was an administrator's reported

behavior at a lower level than the reported behavior of others. Van Hoose and Paradise contended that actual behavior may be at a level below one's level of reasoning. Similarly, principals may report a more ethical course of action for a hypothetical dilemma than they have observed in actual experiences with colleagues. Their intentions have not been realized in observed actions of other administrators.

Principals often explained that their colleagues would choose certain courses of action over their individually preferred ones because of institutional expectations. For example, in response to the case concerning the poor-performing teacher, several administrators reported that they would provide further individual assistance and assure that the students in this class were "protected." One respondent detailed an elaborate remediation plan and reasoned that "we cannot give up on students nor should we give up on teachers." This same administrator, however, believed that most others would simply continue with the unsuccessful district remediation efforts "to satisfy the superintendent." Another principal felt that "most principals in the district would take the 'informal' advice of the superintendent" and allow the teacher to serve out the remaining three years undisturbed. "This is the path of least resistance," said another.

In the matter of the honor student, most administrators opted for immediate suspension. They justified their decision on the basis of school policy. "My job is to see that policy is carried out," argued one principal. "Policy is policy no matter who you are," reasoned another. In this particular case, administrators believed that their colleagues would take the same course of action. This was the only case in which a policy existed that supported an explicit course of action. It seems that when school policy can support a decision, administrators are likely to follow the policy without deviation. Only one principal decided not to suspend the student, but she reasoned that this was a first offense and an honor student. The larger consequences of that decision were not analyzed. The only principal judged to reason at a higher ethical level than the others did suspend the student, but first grappled with the possible effects on both this student and others. A lesser punishment was deemed to be unfair to other students, yet suspension might seriously harm the school's relationship with an otherwise excellent student. The principal decided that consistency and fairness dictated suspension but that the student would benefit from required meetings with the school counselor during each day of the suspension.

Discussion

Research such as this often raises more questions than it answers. While results from both phases of the study provide some indication of the level of moral reasoning of practicing school administrators, questions remain regarding why some administrators operate at higher levels than others and whether reasoning and intentions are acceptable indicators of behavior. With regard to this latter question, we did find in the first phase of the study that reported behavior in real dilemmas was not indicative of high levels of ethical reasoning. Thus, while we may not be sure that these actions were actually taken, we do know that this is the highest level of ethical reasoning for these administrators. According to the Van Hoose and Paradise model, individuals may reason at higher levels than they behave, but they do not behave at higher levels than they can reason.

With regard to the question of cause, our research is less fruitful. We do know that administrators report that others act at lower ethical levels than they would like because of the expectations of the institution. They feel that principals often act in accordance with the superintendent's wishes rather than their own ethical principles. This may suggest that ethical behavior is influenced by the ethical behavior of superordinates; that is, superintendents who are perceived as closed and rule-bound may encourage their subordinates to narrowly construe alternatives to difficult moral issues.

On the basis of our research, it does not appear that the reasoning of administrators becomes more complex with increased experience. Although the sample was too small to warrant any conclusions, the number of years in administration ($\underline{M}$=6.47) was not related to the level of ethical reasoning for this sample. Ethical reasoning does not appear to improve as more dilemmas are confronted. In fact, if indeed the institution cultivates lower levels of ethical reasoning, length of time in the institution may be inversely related to moral growth. Further research is needed to determine whether expectations of district-level administrators do affect the ethical behavior of school principals, and, if so, whether all principals in a district react similarly to district expectations.

Because this research involved a limited number of subjects, the results must be interpreted with caution. One recommendation, however, does seem warranted. Administrators need training in ethical reasoning. Planned, deliberate practice in problem framing and

consequence analysis would allow them to entertain alternative courses of action that do not fit into their previously defined boundaries. Case studies such as those in Ethics of School Administration (Strike, Haller, & Soltis, 1988) are a useful starting point. Yet other more commonly encountered cases must also be considered. (Not every administrator will discover a teacher moonlighting at a topless bar!) Questions of teacher competence and student-teacher conflicts are those that plague principals on a daily basis. These must be the focus of simulation exercises.

Unfortunately, case studies and simulations cannot improve ethical reasoning if they are studied in isolation from actual practice. University courses may provide the forum for such discussions, but it is the district level administration that will determine whether narrow and legalistic interpretations to unique moral dilemmas will prevail. The preferred method of study, therefore, must be the district-directed or district-sanctioned in-service. Ideally, superintendents and other district-level administrators would attend workshops facilitated by outside consultants. Actual and hypothetical cases would be presented and discussed, and alternative solutions would be analyzed for their anticipated moral consequences. Merely providing this opportunity for open and frank discussion of professional dilemmas would indicate a district's support of expanded levels of ethical reasoning. Our research suggests that educational administrators currently are deprived of such support.

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